

Butchering and the Transformation of Work in the 19th Century: The Viennese Slaughterhouse Saint Marx

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Abstract

Slaughterhouses were complex social places at which centralist production forms and craft work coincided. They revolutionised the material culture and organisation of killing. This transformation engendered and set up a specific culture of slaughtering which changed work at different levels. The article examines this transformations at the example of the Viennese slaughterhouse in the quarter Saint Marx in the second half of the 19th century. Its main focus concerns the issue of a new organisation of work and the nexus between space and social practice. Finally the transformation of work which butchers experienced as a professional and financial decline strengthened a group and class building process.

Keywords: Slaughterhouse, butcher, meat supply, craft, class, rationalisation, death

1. Introduction

The history of the slaughterhouse is an unwritten history (Lee, 2008, p. 2). This may surprise insofar slaughterhouses took a central function for the meat supply of the modern city. The scientific disinterest to the history of slaughterhouses is a result of a specific historical process beyond the academic field – a process which formed the meat production more and more invisible: In the 19th century slaughterhouses and with them the industrialised and rationalised killing of animals were carried away bit by bit from the public and scientific view. This invisibility became central for the transformation of slaughtering in the second half of the 19th century. But to what extent work was changed by the establishment of slaughterhouses and which consequences for the working people followed by the new “system”, as the secretary in the chamber of commerce Eugen Schwiedland said in 1896 (Schwiedland, 1896: 1)? Therefore I would like to focus three superordinate questions. *First:* How did a new organisation of work develop and how far did working practices change? *Second:* How did space and social practice interrelate? *Third:* How did the butchers experience that transformations?

2. Historical context

The construction of municipal slaughterhouses in the 19th century was an Europe-wide phenomenon. It was connected to urbanisation processes and the challenges linked with them (e.g. a lack of hygiene, epidemics or health dangers in general) (Rella, 1899). The Viennese slaughterhouse Saint Marx was opened in 1851. Henceforth all butchers were obliged to slaughter in this slaughterhouse. Thus Vienna followed a development which had been rung in France already 40 years before. In 1807 and 1809 Napoleon Bonaparte arranged the establishment of five public slaughterhouses in Paris. Those should also become exemplary for the construction of the Viennese slaughterhouse Saint Marx. Other European states followed this development in future years: Belgium, England and the German countries (Hennicke, 1866, p. 23). At that time a crucial point for the establishment of slaughterhouses was the combination of a discourse among engineers, natural scientists, medics and the willingness of local authorities to massively invest in urban infrastructure. Besides, crucial was the belief, that problems linked with urbanisation processes could be mastered with technical solutions (Lackner, 2004, p. 826). The opening of municipal slaughterhouses and the obligation to slaughter there changed the butchers' working environment significantly.

3. Dimensions of transformation

3.1 Rationalisation

One first development, that can be observed in the second half of the 19th century, is that work became increasingly rationalised. Work was simplified by the introduction of new slaughtering and killing techniques like the so-called “slaughtering mask” (figure 1). Especially those tools were introduced which could be used „by untrained hand“ (Bouterolle, 1875, p. 23). Butchers criticised these instruments because according to them the workmanlike handcraft couldn't be rationalised. Besides, they were afraid that in future butchering could be exerted without a craft-professional qualification (Will man nie gerecht und wahr sein, 1875, p. 121).

Furthermore, rationalisation meant that work should be made easier, the working person should be physically relieved: for example, by ergonomically seeming barrows for the fertilizer removal which relieved the back and went on rails to save physical strength. Work was also made easier by solid installations in the slaughterhouse-buildings, like for example ceiling-mounted trolleys in the slaughtering halls, so that big pieces of meat could be easily moved from A to B (figure 2). At the same time we can observe the beginnings of a machinisation and motorisation of the meat trade: hand-operated machines for meat comminution and sausage production speeded up the meat processing and the first engines for private use were introduced.

3.2 Centralisation

Another aspect of the transformation was the centralisation of work. When local authorities decided that butchering should be only allowed in the municipal slaughterhouse Saint Marx, work was concentrated by the spatial relocation at this place. By the rebuilding of the slaughterhouse and the adjoining area to the “Central slaughtering and cattle market Saint Marx” between 1879 and 1883 this concentration reached its final organisational form: Now the cattle market, slaughterhouse and meat market were concentrated at one place. Covering more than 310,000 square metres this plant was the biggest in Europe. There were halls for 5,000 cattle, 6,000 calves and 6,500 pigs. The slaughterhouse was enlarged with an area of 36,000 square metres. The area had its own rail connection, so that the animals could be directly transported from the livestock producer into the slaughterhouse (Frey, 1879). Besides, so called “slaughtering orders” tried to regulate the complex interactions of daily thousands of cattle traders, butchers, butcher's journeymen and municipal officials. These orders constituted and rationalised a temporal order of the butcherings and prevented jams in the killing process.

3.3 Surveillance

Moreover, work became increasingly controlled and disciplined. On the one hand work became invisible to the outside. The slaughterhouse was located at the urban periphery, it was guarded round-the-clock and the admission was not permitted to unauthorized persons. So, the slaughtering was dislocated “behind the scenes of social life” (Elias, 1991, p. 324). On the other hand work became increasingly visible to the inside. This correlated with the re-building of the slaughterhouse in the late 1870s from the so called “French chamber system”, where the butcher killed an animal in a chamber he rented, to the so called “German hall system”. Here butchers killed several animals in a big hall at the same time. The space-internal visibility of this hall system allowed for enhanced controlling and intervention possibilities by supervisors into the working process (Witz, 1900, p. 438).

4. Hygiene and outsourcing death

The slaughterhouse should not only produce more meat for a growing urban population. The population of Vienna increased tenfold between 1810 and 1914, from 220,000 to 2.2 million. In this period the annual meat consumption rose from 20 to 170 million kilogrammes. A decisive reason to oblige the Viennese butchers to slaughter in Saint Marx as well as to centralise this work were also considerations concerning the so-called “town hygiene” (Rella 1899).

Hygiene aimed at work, the working, the product of work (meat) and the sensuous experience of slaughtering in the sense of a clean, quick and painless killing of animals. The slaughterhouse administration tested different slaughtering tools to develop the optimal killing technique. Favoured was the former mentioned slaughtering mask (figure 1). In the middle of this mask in region of the forehead there was a tubular iron stick. This whole mask was put over the head of the cattle. With a blow on the iron stick this opened the skullcap, whereby the animal was first dazed.

Then “an iron rod is introduced in the open skullcap and thus the brain is destroyed in its connection, which procedure the animal accomanies only with some convulsions” (City Archive Vienna, 1890, p. 4). The animal does not notice that it dies because it is dazed at the moment of the death. Therefore, killing with the slaughtering mask in particular as well as in public slaughterhouses in general was described as an “humane killing” (Mascher, 1888, p. 34) because it deprived the animal, but also the person killing the animal, of the moment of the death.

While on the one hand slaughtering disappeared from the public, on the other hand, killing techniques like the slaughtering mask displaced the experience of killing out of the slaughterhouse. Killing, this is a central aspect of the new system of work (Schwiedland, 1896: 1), turned to be one of many practices. Hence, the slaughterhouse was not only a place at which workmanlike working and centralist production forms clashed or coincided. Besides, it was a place which declared war on all signs of life – right up to the microbes (Kathan, 2004, p. 65).

5. Class building

Butchers experienced these changes in the second half of the 19th century as a process of degradation of their profession. They often interpreted the obligation to slaughter in Saint Marx or the introduction of new slaughtering tools as an illegitimate intervention in traditional competences (Verhandlungen des Ersten österreichischen Fleischhauer- und Fleischselcher-Tages, 1895, p. 2). Some of them experienced this process as a demise and in a few cases butchers even committed suicide. The obituaries published in newspapers saw the causes in a decay process of the craft which concerned every butcher, like the following from the Viennese butchers' newspaper from January 1904:

The suicides of members of our business increase in a frightening manner, and only some years ago one read that colleague Orglmeister hung himself, that two other colleagues jumped in the Danube, and the survivors envy them her courage to end the misery once and for all (Kontraste, 1904).

But inspite of that it would be shortsighted and too fast to speak about the decline of the craft during the 19th century. The subjective feeling for a professional and financial decline at the same time strengthened a group and a class building process as well as a process of social exclusion. Inter alia this process was shown by that fact that the butcher's co-operative published commemorative publications which glorified the past and emphasized an outstanding importance of the butchers' trade (Fajkmajer, 1912). Additionally one founded an own archive to construct a certain picture of the past, new co-operative flags were introduced and one organised festival processions, in which the butchers participate dressed up in historical costumes from the 16th and 17th century (ibid., p. 97). Furthermore in Vienna the craft remain a strong political group. In 1883 the freedom of trade – introduced in 1859 – was almost abolished: the butchers' cooperative set up and controlled the apprenticeship of journeymen and apprentices. As in the time before the freedom of trade the Master Sons were often privileged towards other apprentices and journeymen. Tendentially it was much more easier for them to become a Master or to shorten apprenticeship. Besides, with foundation of the so called „Club of the Viennese Butchers' Sons“ in 1890 the reproduction of the cooperative should be institutionalised (ibid., p. 104).

6. Conclusion

In the 19th century the communalization of meat supply changed the Viennese butchery basically. With the opening of the slaughterhouse Saint Marx the municipality tried to meet new challenges linked to processes of urbanisation (a rapidly growing population and meat consumption, hygienic issues). By obliging the Viennese butchers to slaughter in the slaughterhouse Saint Marx this work disappeared from the public and finally from the bourgeoisie view. Work was centralised, increasingly disciplined and rationalised. Butchers experienced this processes as an illegitimate intervention in traditional competences. The transformation of work led to a reinforced recourse to guild times. The past was imagined as a future ideal and this was the way butchers compensated their experience and fear of degradation of their profession and the menace of social inferiority.

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Figure 1: Slaughtering mask



Source: Die Bouterolle. *Allgemeine Fleischer-Zeitung*, II (July 3, 1875) 1.

Figure 2: Pig slaughtering hall



Source: Picture Archive, Austrian National Library, Inv. No. 199.468 D.